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Cayetano's Rail Tactics a Disservice

For all his professed concern for the taxpayer in his fight against the planned rail system, former Gov. Ben Cayetano is not serving the public interest with his latest tactic of cherry-picking through old communications in his effort to turn public opinion against the project — and to boost his own candidacy for mayor.

As a plaintiff in a federal lawsuit against the \$5.27 billion project, Cayetano has helped to obtain a collection of an estimated 500,000 documents released through the legal discovery process. But at a press conference on Tuesday, he selected only five to release, internal emails from Federal Transit Administration officials who expressed concern about alternatives that were not being studied.

These piecemeal revelations did little to clarify matters. Rather, they muddled the public understanding of a project into which so much already has been invested. What's more, Cayetano's motivations are clear enough: As a candidate running on an anti-rail platform, he is trying to spin facts about the rail project in the way that best serves his political goals.

We expect better from the distinguished former governor of Hawaii.

In a 2009 email, Joseph Ossi, an FTA environmental protection specialist, noted that the Environmental Protection Agency had asked why light rail and an improved bus system weren't among the alternatives considered in the city's environmental impact statement.

City consultants did weigh these options, however. In the course of examining alternatives in 2006, extensive public "scoping" meetings were held. An enhanced bus system was among the alternatives examined, along with fixed-guideway alternatives that included light rail.

Whether or not all the alternatives that already were rejected also needed to be in the EIS is among the issues in the lawsuit, so officials for the Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation have declined comment on that point.

But in selectively raising it, Cayetano fell short of presenting adequate context. This certainly left many with the wrong impression that alternatives had not been considered, or the reasons why they were rejected.

Additionally, the information in the released emails was at best dated and at worst a complete distraction from conditions now. For example, he cited a 2006 email from FTA staffer Raymond Sukys to Ossi,

saying that the FTA had issued an erroneous Notice of Intent to prepare the EIS, a document that was reissued the following year.

"I do not think the FTA should be associated with their lousy practices of public manipulation and we should call them on it," he wrote.

That assessment may have had a basis when it was written, but it does not line up with more current statements from federal officials.

For example: HART officials have been referring inquiries on the issue to the FTA, which last week released a written statement underscoring the agency's support of the project and a "much improved federal partnership with the City of Honolulu and State of Hawaii over the last several years."

"The Federal Transit Administration believes that this project will bring much-needed relief from the suffocating congestion on H-1 and provide a real transportation alternative for the people of Oahu when gas prices rise," the statement continued.

This view was reinforced Thursday in testimony by U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, who said the Obama administration is "committed to the project," which he further characterized as "important."

That certainly seems more relevant than emails going back six years.

The rail project is important to the future redevelopment of urban Oahu, which desperately needs reliable transportation options unfettered by automotive traffic. And that means the facts should not be treated in this cavalier and politically cynical way.

Clearly there is disagreement among residents over the issue, but that chasm will never be bridged by presentations like Cayetano's, which merely sow seeds of doubt rather than informing people responsibly.

Honolulu residents, and voters in the mayoral election, deserve better.

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